



MacLean

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Report  
concerning the disappearance of two  
former Foreign Office Officials

London, September 1955

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## REPORT CONCERNING THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TWO FORMER FOREIGN OFFICE OFFICIALS

On the evening of Friday, May 25, 1951, Mr. Donald Duart Maclean, a Counsellor in the senior branch of the Foreign Service and at that time Head of the American Department in the Foreign Office, and Mr. Guy Francis de Moncy Burgess, a Second Secretary in the junior branch of the Foreign Service, left the United Kingdom from Southampton on the boat for St. Malo. The circumstances of their departure from England, for which they had not sought sanction, were such as to make it obvious that they had deliberately fled the country. Both officers were suspended from duty on June 1, 1951, and their appointments in the Foreign Office were terminated on June 1, 1952, with effect from June 1, 1951.

2. Maclean was the son of a former Cabinet Minister, Sir Donald Maclean. He was born in 1913 and was educated at Gresham's School, Holt, and Trinity College, Cambridge, where he had a distinguished academic record. He successfully competed for the Diplomatic Service in 1935 and was posted in the first instance to the Foreign Office. He served subsequently in Paris, at Washington and in Cairo. He was an officer of exceptional ability and was promoted to the rank of Counsellor at the early age of 35. He was married to an American lady and had two young sons. A third child was born shortly after his disappearance.

3. In May 1950 while serving at His Majesty's Embassy, Cairo, Maclean was guilty of serious misconduct and suffered a form of breakdown which was attributed to overwork and excessive drinking. Until the breakdown took place his work had remained eminently satisfactory and there was no ground whatsoever for doubting his loyalty. After recuperation and leave at home he was passed medically fit, and in October 1950 was appointed to be Head of the American Department of the Foreign Office which, since it does not deal with the major problems of Anglo-American relations, appeared to be within his capacity.

4. Since Maclean's disappearance a close examination of his background has revealed that during his student days at Cambridge from 1931 to 1934 he had expressed Communist sympathies, but there was no evidence that he had ever been a member of the Communist Party and indeed on leaving the University he had outwardly renounced his earlier Communist views.

5. Burgess was born in 1911 and was educated at the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth, at Eton and at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he had a brilliant academic record. After leaving Cambridge in 1935 he worked for a short time in London as a journalist and joined the B.B.C. in 1936 where he remained until January 1939. From 1939 until 1941 he was employed in one of the war propaganda organisations. He rejoined the B.B.C. in January 1941 and remained there until 1944 when he applied for and obtained a post as a temporary press officer in the News Department of the Foreign Office. He was not recruited into the Foreign Service through the open competitive examination but in 1947 took the opportunity open to temporary employees to present himself for establishment. He appeared before a Civil Service Commission Board and was recommended for the junior branch of the Foreign Service. His establishment took effect from

January 1, 1947. He worked for a time in the office of the then Minister of State, Mr. Hector McNeil, and in the Far Eastern Department of the Foreign Office. In August 1950 he was transferred to Washington as a Second Secretary.

6. Early in 1950 the security authorities informed the Foreign Office that in late 1949 while on holiday abroad Burgess had been guilty of indiscreet talk about secret matters of which he had official knowledge. For this he was severely reprimanded. Apart from this lapse his service in the Foreign Office up to the time of his appointment to Washington was satisfactory and there seemed good reason to hope that he would make a useful career.

7. In Washington, however, his work and behaviour gave rise to complaint. The Ambassador reported that his work had been unsatisfactory in that he lacked thoroughness and balance in routine matters, that he had come to the unfavourable notice of the Department of State because of his reckless driving and that he had had to be reprimanded for carelessness in leaving confidential papers unattended. The Ambassador requested that Burgess be removed from Washington and this was approved. He was recalled to London in early May 1951 and was asked to resign from the Foreign Service. Consideration was being given to the steps that would be taken in the event of his refusing to do so. It was at this point that he disappeared.

8. Investigations into Burgess' past have since shown that he, like Maclean, went through a period of Communist leanings while at Cambridge and that he too on leaving the University outwardly renounced his views. No trace can be found in his subsequent career of direct participation in the activities of left-wing organisations; indeed he was known after leaving Cambridge to have had some contact with organisations such as the Anglo-German Club.

9. The question has been asked whether the association of these two officers with each other did not give rise to suspicion. The fact is that although we have since learned that Maclean and Burgess were acquainted during their undergraduate days at Cambridge, they gave no evidence during the course of their career in the Foreign Service of any association other than would be normal between two colleagues. When Burgess was appointed to the Foreign Office Maclean was in Washington and at the time Burgess himself was appointed to Washington Maclean was back in the United Kingdom awaiting assignment to the American Department of the Foreign Office. It is now clear that they were in communication with each other after the return of Burgess from Washington in 1951 and they may have been in such communication earlier. Their relations were, however, never such as to cause remark.

10. In January 1949 the security authorities received a report that certain Foreign Office information had leaked to the Soviet authorities some years earlier. The report amounted to little more than a hint and it was at the time impossible to attribute the leak to any particular individual. Highly secret but widespread and protracted enquiries were begun by the security authorities and the field of suspicion had been narrowed by mid-April 1951 to two or three persons. By the beginning of May Maclean had come to be regarded as the principal suspect. There was, however, even at that time, no legally admissible evidence to support a prosecution under the Official Secrets Acts. Arrangements were made to ensure that information of exceptional secrecy and importance should not come into his hands. In the meantime the security authorities arranged to investigate his activities and contacts in order

to increase their background knowledge and if possible to obtain information which could be used as evidence in a prosecution. On May 25 the then Secretary of State, Mr. Herbert Morrison, sanctioned a proposal that the security authorities should question Maclean. In reaching this decision it had to be borne in mind that such questioning might produce no confession or voluntary statement from Maclean sufficient to support a prosecution but might serve only to alert him and to reveal the nature and the extent of the suspicion against him. In that event he would have been free to make arrangements to leave the country and the authorities would have had no legal power to stop him. Everything therefore depended on the interview and the security authorities were anxious to be as fully prepared as was humanly possible. They were also anxious that Maclean's house at Tatsfield, Kent, should be searched and this was an additional reason for delaying the proposed interview until mid-June when Mrs. Maclean who was then pregnant was expected to be away from home.

11. It is now clear that in spite of the precautions taken by the authorities Maclean must have become aware, at some time before his disappearance, that he was under investigation. One explanation may be that he observed that he was no longer receiving certain types of secret papers. It is also possible that he detected that he was under observation. Or he may have been warned. Searching enquiries involving individual interrogations were made into this last possibility. Insufficient evidence was obtainable to form a definite conclusion or to warrant prosecution.

12. Maclean's absence did not become known to the authorities until the morning of Monday, May 28. The Foreign Office is regularly open for normal business on Saturday mornings but officers can from time to time obtain leave to take a week-end off. In accordance with this practice Maclean applied for and obtained leave to be absent on the morning of Saturday, May 26. His absence therefore caused no remark until the following Monday morning when he failed to appear at the Foreign Office. Burgess was on leave and under no obligation to report his movements.

13. Immediately the flight was known all possible action was taken in the United Kingdom and the French and other Continental security authorities were asked to trace the whereabouts of the fugitives and if possible to intercept them. All British Consulates in Western Europe were alerted and special efforts were made to discover whether the fugitives had crossed the French frontiers on May 26 or 27. As a result of these and other enquiries it was established that Maclean and Burgess together left Tatsfield by car for Southampton in the late evening of Friday, May 25, arrived at Southampton at midnight, caught the s.s. *Falaise* for St. Malo and disembarked at that port at 11.45 the following morning, leaving suitcases and some of their clothing on board. They were not seen on the train from St. Malo to Paris and it has been reported that two men, believed to be Maclean and Burgess, took a taxi to Rennes and there got the 1.18 p.m. train to Paris. Nothing more was seen of them.

14. Since the disappearance various communications have been received from them by members of their families. On June 7, 1951, telegrams ostensibly from Maclean were received by his mother Lady Maclean, and his wife Mrs. Melinda Maclean, who were both at that time in the United Kingdom. The telegram to Lady Maclean was a short personal message, signed by a nick-name known only within the immediate family circle. It merely stated that all was well. That addressed to Mrs. Maclean was similar, expressing regret for the unexpected departure and was signed "Donald." Both telegrams were despatched in Paris on the evening of

June 6. Their receipt was at once reported to the security authorities, but it was impossible to identify the person or persons who had handed them in. The original telegraph forms showed, however, that the messages had been written in a hand which was clearly not Maclean's. The character of the hand-writing, and some mis-spelling, suggested that both telegrams had been written by a foreigner.

15. On June 7, 1951, a telegram was received in London by Mrs. Bassett, Burgess' mother. It contained a short and affectionate personal message, together with a statement that the sender was embarking on a long Mediterranean holiday, and was ostensibly from Burgess himself. The telegram had been handed in at a Post Office in Rome earlier on the day of its receipt. As with the telegrams from Paris to Maclean's family, there was no possibility of identifying the person who had handed it in. The hand-writing had the appearance of being foreign, and was certainly not that of Burgess.

16. According to information given to the Foreign Office in confidence by Mrs. Dunbar, Maclean's mother-in-law, who was then living with her daughter at Tatsfield, she received on August 3, 1951, two registered letters posted in St. Gallen, Switzerland, on August 1. One contained a draft on the Swiss Bank Corporation, London, for the sum of £1,000 payable to Mrs. Dunbar; the other, a draft payable to Mrs. Dunbar for the same sum, drawn by the Union Bank of Switzerland on the Midland Bank, 122 Old Broad Street, London. Both drafts were stated to have been remitted by order of a Mr. Robert Becker, whose address was given as the Hotel Central, Zurich. Exhaustive enquiries in collaboration with the Swiss authorities have not led to the identification of Mr. Becker and it is probable that the name given was false.

17. Shortly after the receipt of these bank drafts Mrs. Maclean received a letter in her husband's hand-writing. It had been posted in Reigate, Surrey, on August 5, 1951, and was of an affectionate, personal nature as from husband to wife. It gave no clue as to Maclean's whereabouts or the reason for his disappearance but it explained that the bank drafts, which for convenience had been sent to Mrs. Dunbar, were intended for Mrs. Maclean.

18. Lady Maclean received a further letter from her son on August 15, 1951. There is no doubt that it was in his own hand-writing. It had been posted at Herne Hill on August 11.

19. Mrs. Bassett, the mother of Burgess, received a letter in Burgess' hand-writing on December 22, 1953. The letter was personal and gave no information as to Burgess' whereabouts. It was simply dated "November" and had been posted in South-East London on December 21. The last message received from either of the two men was a further letter from Burgess to his mother which was delivered in London on December 25, 1954. This letter was also personal and disclosed nothing of Burgess' whereabouts. It too was simply dated "November." It had been posted in Poplar, E. 14, on December 23.

20. On September 11, 1953, Mrs. Maclean, who was living in Geneva, left there by car with her three children. She had told her mother, who was staying with her, that she had unexpectedly come across an acquaintance whom she and her husband had previously known in Cairo and that he had invited her and the children to spend the week-end with him at Territet, near Montreux. She stated that she would return to Geneva on September 13 in time for the two elder children to attend school the following day. By September 14 her mother, alarmed at her failure to return, reported the

matter to Her Majesty's Consul-General in Geneva and also by telephone to London. Security officers were at once despatched to Geneva where they placed themselves at the disposal of the Swiss police who were already making intensive enquiries. On the afternoon of September 16 Mrs. Maclean's car was found in a garage in Lausanne. She had left it on the afternoon of the 11th saying she would return for it in a week. The garage hand who reported this added that Mrs. Maclean had then proceeded with her children to the Lausanne railway station. On the same day, September 16, Mrs. Dunbar reported to the Geneva police the receipt of a telegram purporting to come from her daughter. The telegram explained that Mrs. Maclean had been delayed "owing to unforeseen circumstances" and asked Mrs. Dunbar to inform the school authorities that the two elder children would be returning in a week. Mrs. Maclean's youngest child was referred to in this telegram by a name known only to Mrs. Maclean, her mother and other intimates. The telegram had been handed in at the Post Office in Territet at 10.58 that morning by a woman whose description did not agree with that of Mrs. Maclean. The hand-writing on the telegram form was not Mrs. Maclean's and it showed foreign characteristics similar to those in the telegrams received in 1951 by Lady Maclean, Mrs. Maclean and Mrs. Bassett.

21. From information subsequently received from witnesses in Switzerland and Austria, it seems clear that the arrangements for Mrs. Maclean's departure from Geneva had been carefully planned, and that she proceeded by train from Lausanne on the evening of September 11, passing the Swiss-Austrian frontier that night, and arriving at Schwarzbach St. Veit in the American Zone of Austria at approximately 9.15 on the morning of September 12. The independent evidence of a porter at Schwarzbach St. Veit and of witnesses travelling on the train has established that she left the train at this point. Further evidence, believed to be reliable, shows that she was met at the station by an unknown man driving a car bearing Austrian number plates. The further movements of this car have not been traced. It is probable that it took Mrs. Maclean and the children from Schwarzbach St. Veit to neighbouring territory in Russian occupation whence she proceeded on her journey to join her husband.

22. There was no question of preventing Mrs. Maclean from leaving the United Kingdom to go to live in Switzerland. Although she was under no obligation to report her movements, she had been regularly in touch with the security authorities, and had informed them that she wished to make her home in Switzerland. She gave two good reasons, firstly that she wished to avoid the personal embarrassment to which she had been subjected by the press in the United Kingdom, and secondly, that she wished to educate her children in the International School in Geneva. It will be remembered that Mrs. Maclean was an American citizen and in view of the publicity caused by her husband's flight it was only natural that she should wish to bring up her children in new surroundings. Before she left for Geneva the security authorities made arrangements with her whereby she was to keep in touch with the British authorities in Berne and Geneva in case she should receive any further news from her husband or require advice or assistance. Mrs. Maclean was a free agent. The authorities had no legal means of detaining her in the United Kingdom. Any form of surveillance abroad would have been unwarranted.

23. In view of the suspicions held against Maclean and of the conspiratorial manner of his flight, it was assumed, though it could not be proved, that his destination and that of his companion must have been the

Soviet Union or some other territory behind the Iron Curtain. Now Vladimir Petrov, the former Third Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Canberra who sought political asylum on April 3, 1954, has provided confirmation of this. Petrov himself was not directly concerned in the case and his information was obtained from conversation with one of his colleagues in Soviet service in Australia. Petrov states that both Maclean and Burgess were recruited as spies for the Soviet Government while students at the University, with the intention that they should carry out their espionage tasks in the Foreign Office, and that in 1951, by means unknown to him, one or other of the two men became aware that their activities were under investigation. This was reported by them to the Soviet Intelligence Service who then organised their escape and removal to the Soviet Union. Petrov has the impression that the escape route included Czechoslovakia and that it involved an aeroplane flight into that country. Upon their arrival in Russia, Maclean and Burgess lived near Moscow. They were used as advisers to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other Soviet agencies. Petrov adds that one of the men (Maclean) has since been joined by his wife.

24. Two points call for comment: first, how Maclean and Burgess remained in the Foreign Service for so long and second, why they were able to get away.

25. When these two men were given their appointments nothing was on record about either to show that he was unsuitable for the public service. It is true that their subsequent personal behaviour was unsatisfactory, and this led to action in each case. As already stated Maclean was recalled from Cairo in 1950 and was not re-employed until he was declared medically fit. Burgess was recalled from Washington in 1951 and was asked to resign. It was only shortly before Maclean disappeared that serious suspicion of his reliability was aroused and active enquiries were set on foot.

26. The second question is how Maclean and Burgess made good their escape from this country when the security authorities were on their track. The watch on Maclean was made difficult by the need to ensure that he did not become aware that he was under observation. This watch was primarily aimed at collecting, if possible, further information and not at preventing an escape. In imposing it a calculated risk had to be taken that he might become aware of it and might take flight. It was inadvisable to increase this risk by extending the surveillance to his home in an isolated part of the country and he was therefore watched in London only. Both men were free to go abroad at any time. In some countries no doubt Maclean would have been arrested first and questioned afterwards. In this country no arrest can be made without adequate evidence. At the time there was insufficient evidence. It was for these reasons necessary for the security authorities to embark upon the difficult and delicate investigation of Maclean, taking into full account the risk that he would be alerted. In the event he was alerted and fled the country together with Burgess.

27. As a result of this case, in July 1951 the then Secretary of State, Mr. Herbert Morrison, set up a Committee of enquiry to consider the security checks applied to members of the Foreign Service; the existing regulations and practices of the Foreign Service in regard to any matters having a bearing on security; and to report whether any alterations were called for. The Committee reported in November 1951. It recommended, among other things, a more extensive security check on Foreign Service officers than had until then been the practice. This was immediately put into effect and since 1952 searching enquiries have been made into the antecedents and associates of all those occupying or applying for positions in the Foreign Office involving

highly secret information. The purpose of these enquiries is to ensure that no one is appointed to or continues to occupy any such post unless he or she is fit to be entrusted with the secrets to which the post gives access. The Foreign Secretary of the day approved the action required.

28. A great deal of criticism has been directed towards the reticence of Ministerial replies on these matters; an attitude which it was alleged would not have been changed had it not been for the Petrov revelations. Espionage is carried out in secret. Counter-espionage equally depends for its success upon the maximum secrecy of its methods. Nor is it desirable at any moment to let the other side know how much has been discovered or guess at what means have been used to discover it. Nor should they be allowed to know all the steps that have been taken to improve security. These considerations still apply and must be the basic criterion for judging what should or should not be published.

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